

STATE OF CONNECTICUT

Wilderness School News

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Director's News

Signs of the Times

By Dave Czaja, Director

Winter Courses Are Coming !

The end of Wilderness School fall courses can mean one thing with great certainty -- winter courses are soon to follow!

We recognize there are many who prefer staying inside when the snow flies and cold temperatures arrive to stay, and we too appreciate some of the cozy features of a New England winter -- hot chocolate, warm clothes and boots, perhaps even a toasty fire, none of which will find many complaints from the Wilderness School staff.

However, we also enjoy taking people outside for our winter adventures in and around the snowy forests of Wilderness School base camp in East Hartland. We enjoy it very much, in fact, so much so that I am not sure we can contain ourselves, actually. This is because these experiences are rewarding as well as simply Too Much Fun. And as you may know among other things, we are great believers in having fun!

One excellent example of winter fun is cross country skiing. This is often the most thrilling winter activity due to the quick flights down hills and 'round corners on ski trails in the woods. The thrills and spills of cross country skiing are almost sure to deliver the first smiles of success.

I also believe the rewards and challenges of learning a new skill such as skiing or snow shoeing are equally positive for Wilderness

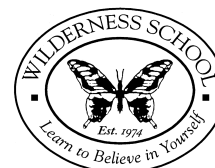
School students, perhaps more so in some cases. This is, after all, the Wilderness School. Challenges, pushing yourself, and finding inner strengths -- these may sound familiar. It is well known the Wilderness School uses experiential learning -- learning by doing -- which is a time tested way for people to learn. How often do we see our first time skiers fall down more than a few times at the beginning of a cross country skiing day, only to excel later? The Wilderness School is very proud of our Instructors' skill in helping students learn by doing, then making these experiences



building blocks for continued success at home, in school, and in the community. Learning comes in many forms!

Did you know?

As a State of Connecticut, Department of Children and Families (DCF) program, the Wilderness School is committed to working with youth facing many different types of challenges. Over nearly four decades of operating wilderness challenge courses for Connecticut youth, the Wilderness School has been fortunate to serve youth with a great variety in background, in age, and in the challenges they are presented with in daily living. These youth include those actively engaged in DCF services in addition to those addressing challenges through services in their communities, such as a guidance clinic or a youth services bureau. Wilderness School students may have histories with juvenile justice systems, educational difficulties, or be struggling



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To learn more about Wilderness School Programs in collaboration with DCF Prevention Services, CYSA and others, please visit the program webpage at <http://www.ct.gov/dcf> and go to DCF Programs and Services.

For Enrollment information contact Bonnie at: bonnie.sterpka@ct.gov

Wilderness School

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Congratulations Don!

See page 2 for the story

(Director's News Continued)

Wilderness School students also share bonds with each other, including one in particular that helps build unity from the beginning of one's experience with our program. That quality is the desire to work on the life challenges, and this is one feature of the Wilderness School that I am grateful for and that is a good reminder as we begin the 2011 holiday season.



Did You Know, II

Two transitions have taken place in recent times for the Wilderness School. The first is our new 'home' at DCF in Adolescent Services. This is not exactly a new home so much as a return to a work group we have participated in for a considerable period of time.

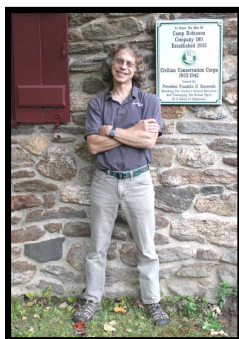
We are excited for two reasons -- first is that we expect to be able to work even more closely with a wide variety of programs DCF runs for adolescents under the agency's care. Second, we anticipate being able to continue working with the youth and colleagues in DCF Prevention Services we came into contact with while initiating several programs in juvenile diversion.

Last, our direct liaison within DCF is Gene Marchand who is not only a former, long time referring agency person, but also a member of our previous Board of Directors and DCF colleague for many years.



CONGRATULATIONS! Don P. Hits the Retirement Circuit

Yet another transition at the Wilderness School came with the September 30th retirement of Don Pelletier, Field Coordinator.



Don has been the rock of logistics, climbing and ropes courses, and all things equipment, supplies and coordination of field activities since 1984. That is 1-9-8-4! Wow!

Don began as an Instructor in 1982 after having worked in the adventure component of the Beckett Academy as well as in retail sales at Eastern Mountain Sports. If you know Don, you will also be aware that he has hiked the entire Appalachian Trail ... twice!

Our former Director, Tom Dyer, who hired Don, used to say he had never met anyone so excited to be offered a job at the Wilderness School. And if there is one thing true, Don loved working at the program. However, as all things must pass, so too must staff move on when the time comes, and for Don, this was a brief window to take retirement



from his position with the State of Connecticut.

Don has made many contributions at the Wilderness School. He took a semi polished version of the program instructor manual and converted it through desktop publishing to a highly polished publication. He did the same with other compilations at the Wilderness School, and further, added layers of greater detail for clarity.

Don has also taken the basic Wilderness School rock climbing and ropes course programs and continuously upgraded them for safety through close attention to national standards. And when it comes to equipment and finding the best gear for Wilderness School kids -- at the best price -- ask any vendor of outdoor equipment around and they all know Don! Kidding aside, Don was always very careful of the State "dollar" and mindful of providing our kids with safe, comfortable gear and clothing.



Of my many memories of working with Don, these stand out. First, editing our manuals together, literally poring over thousands of words to choose the best language for our program policies and procedures, with the end of kids' safety and wellbeing always in mind. Also, and this is my favorite, watching Don exude tremendous patience with a beginner in skiing or some other activity who might be struggling. I can to this day imagine Don at the back of a line of cross country skiers somewhere in the woods, encouraging a student who has fallen again and again. Helping them up, then giving pointers so they have a bit more success the next time.

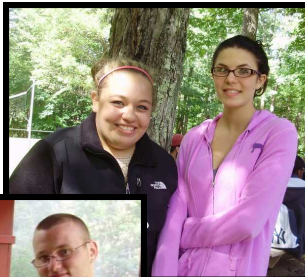
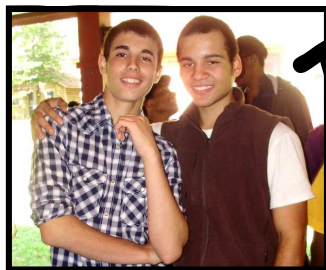
That is the image of Don I will remember, along with many students who benefitted from the many times he stayed back to give a hand.

Good luck to Don



in all future endeavors!

Reunion!



Fall Follow Up Season kicked off by Reunion

On September 17th, former students, staff, friends and family members came from near and far to celebrate the annual Wilderness School reunion. What a day it was!

After kicking off with a giant welcome circle, guests chose from a wide variety of activities. Some shot hoops, others challenged themselves on the low ropes course, one group played an epic volleyball match, and many chose to use the time to catch up with old crewmembers and staff. When noon rolled around, it was time for lunch. Based on how much food we had, it would have been hard to leave the table without a full stomach – hotdogs, hamburgers, chicken, pasta salad, roasted veggies, chips, cookies, brownies, cupcakes... a big thank you to all those who brought goods to share!



The afternoon then began with a wacky relay race. Students had to complete a series of events that included: balancing an egg on a spoon, sifting through a pot of cooked macaroni with bare hands to find a hidden object, and running across the field – all while wearing an oversized jumpsuit and big rubber boots! I remember lots of smiles, laughs, and photographs taken of everyone in their funny attire.

The last initiative of the day was the Wall. Those who weren't too tired from the day's earlier activities gathered by the tall wooden structure for one final challenge – to get all of their group members up and over the wall. While some had completed the activity before on their summer course, it was new for others. Not only were they successful – all participants made it over – but they did so with speed and finesse. A job well done!



And of course – one could not talk about this day without thanking those who were able to come out and join us for reunion. The Wilderness School thrives on the energy of its students, family, and friends, and we look forward to seeing you back here in East Hartland sometime soon.

Shared By: Kayla, Instructor



GREAT Opportunity for 20-day Graduates!

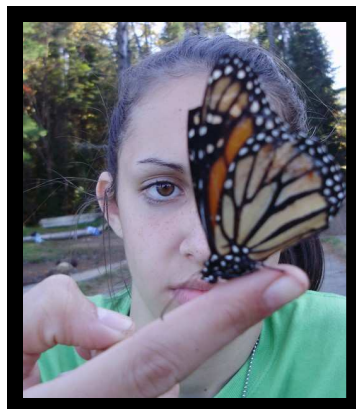
The staff at the Wilderness School want to give you an opportunity to apply for a **NOLS Scholarship (National Outdoor Leadership School)**. The NOLS scholarship is for a 15-day or 30-day course - we have had previous scholarship recipients attend courses in Wyoming, Idaho, Alaska and the Yukon Territory of Canada! Go to www.nols.edu to find information on NOLS, course schedules and course areas. In the past, some Wilderness School students have received full scholarships for tuition - around \$4,000.00. NOLS requires that applicants supply a great deal of their own clothing and equipment (some of this can be purchased, rented from NOLS or borrowed from the Wilderness School) - past students have paid \$200-\$300 for gear and clothing requirements. Travel to and from the course will be the responsibility of the individual. Plane tickets vary depending on the location of the course.



If you are interested in applying for the scholarship, please email bonnie.sterpka@ct.gov and I will send you the information on the application process and answer any questions about NOLS.

Thanks and good luck to you!
Bonnie

Adirondacks Canoe Course





Two Follow Up Crews Explore the Beautiful Adirondack Lakes in Canoes

October 6th-10th, 2011

Boys Crew:

Columbus Day weekend turned out to be the perfect weekend for our crew of nine to set out on a fantastic canoe adventure. Fully outfitted for anything that could come our way, we drove 5 hours to the Adirondack wilderness area in upstate New York where we set out on the pristine Forked Lake in our 5 fully loaded boats. With great excitement, we arrived at our private campsite by dusk just in time to make a delicious dinner and enjoy a campfire in our new home. The camp, left with the legacy of life-by-the-lake, was complete with remnants of old rustic building foundations. As our time together unfolded, so did our experience of the north-country lakes. The bright mountain foliage was a constant reminder of the season as it cast colorful reflections in every ripple; and the loons, a totem of northern lakes, reminded us of just where in the world we were paddling. They visited us with their hauntingly beautiful calls, swimming along side as we paddled, and serenading us at night while we slept.

Many miles were paddled over the 5 days of our course, and this was no easy tour. The miles were all left to our human power, as there was no wind to push us forward, nor inspire us to dig our paddles deep. Our spirits were lifted by a balance of sun, hard work, play, and rests by the campfire. From Frisbee to swimming to singing songs while paddling, this crew demonstrated first class resiliency. When our spirit was called into question by long, heavy portages or too many miles under the sun, they bounced back like a buoy in a storm. All said and done, this was a top notch adventure we shared, one to be remembered and retold for years to come!

Shared By: Kenny, Instructor

Adirondacks!

Co-Ed Canoe Crew:

Usually, in late autumn we expect ing us to the bone, causing us to be able, warm sleeping bags during usual indeed. Temperatures climbed to around 65-70 degrees daily and, without a raindrop in sight, the sun made our adventure even more pleasant. Some brave students even went for a swim!

I must say proudly, that the ADK crews of 2011 were high performers, succeeding at challenges day after day, including harnessing the wind to sail for miles! These students worked exceptionally well as a team to capitalize on daylight to get to camp early enough to erect bomber campsites and cook really great dinners. After sundown and "camp straight" routine, the crew reaped the fruits of their labor, enjoying cool autumn evenings around cozy fires, sipping hot chocolate, laughing and telling stories. Beautiful, golden sunrises and sunsets represented new beginnings and fulfilling endings throughout our adventure.

These are some of the experiences that I will never forget, with students that really appreciate the outdoors and seek opportunities to better themselves and others. I'm sure the participants on the ADK 2011 course will not forget the experiences of challenge, success, reflection, and, most of all, celebration. Well done team!

Shared by: Sterling, Instructor

Follow-Up Ropes Course

During the fall the Wilderness School uses the Tandem ropes course, (tandem translates as two), meaning that most of the elements on the course require that two people work together and trust one another in order to successfully complete each section. The follow-up Tandem ropes course events were a complete success, with every student getting a chance to experience the thrill of being high up in the trees, almost 40 feet off the ground. We even had most of our students execute the Meatball element, which requires students to first climb 35 feet up the side of a tree, while on belay. Then, once at the top, they must jump off a platform and slap a giant ball while enjoying a second or two of utter freefall! The follow-up ropes course events were an excellent way for the students to improve on their communication skills and to practice the art of teamwork.

Shared By: Nate, Instructor





A Day of Service, AND Caving RETURNS!

Shared By: Nicky Wood,
Instructor



Just a week after the crazy, out-of-season October blizzard crippled many parts of Connecticut with tree damage and power outages, we enjoyed a beautiful sunny and cool weekend more typical of that time of year. Still, the blizzard greatly affected our course. Just days before the course, instructors decided that changes were necessary for safety. Typically on our Adventure Weekend, we have enjoyed Caving and a Tyrolean Traverse, which is a complex pulley system set up over a waterfall to allow students to pull themselves over the ravine. Due to slippery and icy rocks near the waterfall and high water conditions we were forced to cancel this component. What could we do instead? Many of us sat around the office and scratched our heads, searching for a worthy replacement, when it suddenly came to us; a service project to help out our neighbors in need.

Service has always been a pillar of our program here at the Wilderness School and it is important to show that we don't just do service when it is convenient to us, but also when it is needed the most. So our Adventure Weekend became slightly less adventurous in the typical wilderness excursion way, but some would argue that it became more adventurous. The Marrien-Webster Dictionary describes "adventure" as an exciting or remarkable experience, and our service project certainly was that.

Students were picked up from our typical meeting spots and driven straight to Bloomfield Connecticut, a particularly hard hit community, where we met up with a few older or less physically able members of the community. A few hours with Wilderness School students in your backyard and we'll have it looking better than ever! Instructors used chain saws on the large broken trees and students pruned small branches and hauled the whole mess to



the road for pick up. While we had only confirmed to help two homes, we managed to clean up a total of four homes by 2 pm and created quite a stir in the neighborhood. Tim C, one of our students, even helped fix a generator...GO TIM! Every one of our students worked really hard with no expectation of payment or reward. The smiles on the faces of the people we helped was more than enough to know it was worth our time to come and lend a hand. Many important lessons were learned that day about how rewarding hard work can be on its own, and how important it is to help our fellow neighbors in need. We returned to the Wilderness School that evening in good spirits to hot cocoa, pizza and s'mores around the campfire!



The next morning we embarked on our planned adventure...CAVING! Our caving program has been on a hiatus since 2007 due to the White Nose Syndrome which has plagued bats in the Northeast and caused a huge drop in the population. Now, cavers know how to help stop the spread of this bat disease, harmless to humans. That being said, our fearless Wilderness School students were the first crew to enter the cave in four years! Donning our very stylish caving garb, including giant rubber army boots known as "Mouse Boots" for their likeness to Micky Mouse's feet, mechanic jump suits, green wool pants and jackets, helmets, work gloves, and our signature navy blue thermals. The cave is a constant chilly 55 degrees year round and when we get into the water it often feels even colder. You heard right...I said water, but I'm getting ahead of myself, first getting into the cave.



The Clarksville, NY cave is the most popular non-commercialized cave in the Northeast. Cavers from all over explore the strange underground passageways and rooms. After a short hike from the parking area, we looked down into a ravine and observed the small hole in the ground that is the entrance! After wiggling around for a little bit we all managed to squeeze our way down into the hole. On went our head lamps and it was all OOOOOHS and AAAAAHHHS as we entered the first big room. Crazy rock formations, shimmering drops of water hanging from the ceiling and an underground river echoed through through the cave. We had to push ourselves through uncomfortably tight places by crawling and sometimes slithering along the muddy ground. Exploring the strange darkness, we turned off our lights to see just how dark it really is. Darker than any dark you've ever experienced, you can't even see your hand right in front of your face! So dark your mind plays tricks on you. Finally we made it to our destination, the Twinkle Room, where the cave dead ends at a large pool of water. This didn't stop most of our students from continuing to explore as they waded into the icy water, clothes and all, and made their way through a tunnel. On the way out we took the wetter route following the stream of water back to the entrance. We couldn't get any wetter so why not?

When we emerged from the deep covered from head to toe in a thick layer of brown cave sludge, all we could do was laugh because it was so good to see the sun. You don't realize how good it feels to live above ground until you've spent some time under it. Piling back into the van, stinky wet gear on the roof, we returned to Connecticut conquered heroes, not only of the great unknown, but also of the many hundreds of pounds of yard debris that sat piled and organized on the side of the road awaiting pick up. Until next follow up, when the snow flies for real, and we strap on the skis and snowshoes...so long Wilderness School Adventurers!



JRB 3-day Expedition



On September 9th, 2011, 7 students arrived at the Wilderness School for a 3-day adventure. We had quite the range of previous experiences on this crew – a 20-day graduate, 2 5-day graduates, 2 students who had completed a number of one-day trips throughout the summer, and 2 students who had never before set foot at the Wilderness School. Despite prior experience with the Wilderness School, however, the recent passing of Hurricane Irene made this course unique, and one that even the most seasoned Wilderness School student wouldn't forget.

The crew spent the first night at base camp then arose early the next morning to prepare for their hike up Bear Mountain. Because some had climbed the peak before, the group decided to take a non-traditional route to the top. We stopped by an old AMC cabin then continued upwards on the trail. Due to all the rain,

however, the usually muddy path had become a thick swamp, and students had no choice but to slosh through the water, getting their socks and boots soaking wet. While my co-instructor Nate and I worried that students wouldn't want to get their feet wet, the opposite was true — the kids welcomed the opportunity to get a little dirty and splashed through the standing water.

The next challenge Irene presented came the following morning. Water levels during the storm had risen so high that it had washed away the footbridge used to exit the campsite. Not wanting to wade across the waist deep creek, the group searched for an alternative route. Soon, however, it became apparent that no such route existed and the group would have to build their own bridge across. Then it began: one by one, students carried large rocks over to the river's edge and tossed them into the water. The

objective was to make a series of stepping-stones so that group members could make it across without getting wet. Just 45 minutes later, the rock bridge was complete and all crewmembers had safely crossed. The funny thing was, however, almost everybody was soaking wet! In the process of building the bridge, so many people had offered to jump into the water – either to help position the rocks or to carry backpacks across – that they were as wet as if we hadn't bothered with a bridge at all! Seeing everyone work together and laughing in the water was the highlight of my weekend – and I think the highlight of many others as well.

Thank you Irene – it wouldn't have been the same without you!

Shared by: Kayla, Instructor

SYNERGY



CANOE COURSE

On Friday September 30th, the Wilderness School welcomed students from East Hartford's Synergy High School for an adventurous day of paddling on Eagleville Lake. It was fantastic! The weather was considerably warm for late September and the cloudless sky and steady breeze made it seem like a beautiful summer day! Instructors Nate B and Danielle C met the enthusiastic group from Synergy and drove to the Willimantic River in Mansfield. This picturesque section of the river is an ideal location to start a canoe course. It allows for paddlers to practice their skills before the open windy paddle across Eagleville Lake.

Nate and Danielle were impressed as the Synergy students deftly unloaded boats, demonstrated sharp-looking paddle strokes during the lessons, and worked efficiently to get the first part of the day going. In fact, the group was able to get on the water sooner than originally anticipated. Several students revealed that they

had canoed and spent time in the wilderness as part of a school program the prior summer.

On the river, everyone had the opportunity to practice strokes, maneuver boats, and to work out communication between partners. It wasn't always easy, but by the time the group reached the end of the river, everyone looked smooth. The group moved quickly across the lake with students laughing and playing the whole way. Lunch was catamaran style and even though Synergy brought their own lunches, a few couldn't resist famous Wilderness School PB &J and GORP! Perhaps one of the more memorable parts of the afternoon included the group opting to intentionally flip boats, cool off in the lake and then practice t-rescues that were performed with style. Overall, it was a fun day and the Wilderness School looks forward to having Synergy out again!

Shared By: Danielle, Instructor



Passages Group Home Rock Climbing

Two group homes came together on October 12 to have a day on the rocks. There was a bit of hesitation to start, not knowing what was involved in rock climbing, which was new to most. Apprehension aside, the day moved along and before you know it they were hootin' and hollerin' for each other. Everyone climbed, including the adult staff who came with the students! Everyone pushed up against their limits and stretched them just a bit further out from where they started. It was a most enthusiastic day, and this was largely due to the energy and intensity that each participant brought. I think the students had the most critical observation of the day. When they spoke of trying new things with an open and positive mind they reminded themselves, and all of us, what really turns a good day into a great one!

Shared By: Kenny, Instructor

Y-US!

**A high Energy Day of Team Building,
Fun and Exploration**



As an instructor at the Wilderness School, there is nothing quite like the morning before a course. Cool and quite up on our little hill in East Hartland, we take care of last minute details and wait patiently for vans or cars to arrive. Normally we see sleepy or nervous teenagers slowly creep out of the vehicles and tentatively start the day's activities. On the morning of October 15th however, instructors Nicky, Kayla and Nate were in for something a little bit different. As the doors of the van slid open, out popped 15 excited kids aged 8-12, so thrilled to be there they could hardly contain themselves. Y-US stands for "Youth United for Survival" and they

have participated in courses a few times before with their older kids, but this was the first time we saw some of their younger students. We spent the day laughing ourselves silly and playing so many games it was hard to remember them all by the end of the day. These younger students weren't just here to have fun, we also learned a little bit about working together as a team, communicating with each other, nature, and making new friends. During lunch we explored the woods near by and found a couple of cool orange newts and even a hawk skull...which will now be proudly displayed in the small Wilder-

ness School Nature Museum. Sitting around our campfire at the end of the day discussing what our favorite part was, we had a few different answers. Some said, "Where's My Chicken?" was the favorite game, while others liked "The Nitro Crossing" initiative the best, but if we all had to decide on one thing it would be unanimous...EVERYTHING!! There is one thing for certain with Y-US, they are an enthusiastic, fun group of people. Thanks for a great day!

Shared by: Nicky, Instructor



CJTS:

17 Miles

2.5 days!

What better way to start off our fall season with a killer hike from Jug End to Plateau Campsite on the Appalachian Trail. This 17 mile hike has taken Wilderness School crews up to 4 days to complete, but not CJTS. These gentlemen busted it out in an astonishing 2 and a half days! With one very long 9 mile day over three peaks, including the infamous Bear Mountain, the tallest mountain in Connecticut. That evening we were in camp by 4pm, with enough time to play Crazy Eights, our favorite card game, around the picnic table before dinner. I'd like to say that instructors Nicky and Sterling lead these guys through the woods, but we were left in the dust most of the time, speed was not something these boys were lacking. Nor initiative! Not only did this crew excel

on trail but they also proved to be pretty handy around camp too, often times setting up and breaking down camp in half the time we had planned for. Connecticut Juvenile Training School has come to us for a few years now, and they do not cease to amaze us with their ability to hike hard and give every activity their best. These guys were not afraid of early starts to watch the sunrise on top of Everett Mountain, or cold water! After a fridged dip in Sages Ravine, SOME of them even said they felt much fresher and clean afterwards. We lucked out with warm weather during the day and cool enough evenings to drive away the mosquitoes. CJTS returned for more on a cold morning in October for a large dose of Tandem Ropes Course. The theme of the day was building trust, doing this through small



experiences allowed all the participants to try scarier elements as day went on. To cement this idea of trust, everyone ended their experience by making the ultimate leap of faith...THE MEATBALL! In this activity students climb to a platform about 30 feet up in a tree and leap into the air to hit a giant rubber ball known as The Meatball. While students are safely tied into our belay system and simply dangle in the air before being slowly lowered to the ground, it is still a huge act of faith and trust, enough to scare the pants of even the bravest of us. As always CJTS, it has been a thrill and blast. We can't wait to see you back here soon!

Shared by: Nicky, Instructor



Winter Follow Up Course Schedule...

WINTER ANIMAL TRACKING

(MAY INCLUDE OTHER ACTIVITIES DEPENDING ON SNOW CONDITIONS):

Saturday, January 7, 2012.

CROSS-COUNTRY SKIING

(MAY INCLUDE OTHER ACTIVITIES DEPENDING ON SNOW CONDITIONS):

Saturday, January 28, 2012

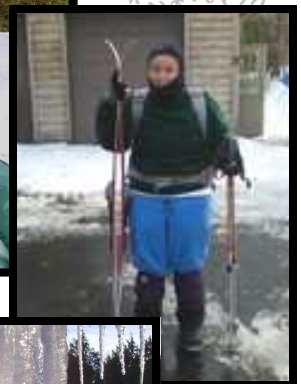
WINTER PEAK CLIMB

(MAY INCLUDE OTHER ACTIVITIES DEPENDING ON SNOW CONDITIONS):

Saturday, February 25, 2012

Students, we would love to see you out here for a Follow-Up course! Please call or email now if you are interested! There are a limited number of spaces.

DCFWS.FOLLOWUP@CT.GOV
or (860) 653.8059



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